A Framework for the Creation of Task-Based Courses for First-Year Students at Asia University

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Introduction

In this paper, I describe the introduction of a task-based course for first-year students at Asia University (AU). I outline the rationale for the approach and describe steps taken to design, implement, and assess the course. I follow this with a brief discussion of the initial indications of the success of the course and make suggestions as to how the framework can be developed and adapted to other programs. It is my view that this approach to course and syllabus design offers a potential way forward in the development of English programs at AU.

The First-Year English Program at AU

According to the AU website (n.d.), the compulsory first-year undergraduate English course (FE) is "an integrated-skills, topic-based EFL course with an emphasis on speaking and listening skills." The program has the following four "goals and objectives:"

- Students will develop skills to adapt to FE classroom culture.
- Students will improve their English communication skills.
- Students will improve their abilities to interact with people from other cultures.
- Students will develop skills to express critical thinking in English.

The classes of approximately 20 to 25 learners meet for five 45-minute periods a week over two 15-week semesters, with a total contact time of 112.5 hours. The course is largely conducted in English by a native-English speaking Visiting Faculty Member (VFM) from the university's Center for English Language Education (CELE). For most groups, one of the weekly periods is devoted to explicit grammar teaching by a Japanese teacher.

The learners are placed in their classes according to their normed performance in a discrete-item listening, reading, and grammar test. Although the absence of criterion-based placement makes a comparison difficult, the overwhelming majority of learners are at approximately A1/A2 levels on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEF) (Appendix A). A small minority of classes, often consisting of non-Japanese learners or returnees, may be at B1 or higher. Learner motivation is variable, partly due perhaps to the compulsory nature of the course and little apparent application for English outside the classroom.

Currently at AU, the syllabuses for the first-year course are those contained in the commercially available *Top Notch* course books (Saslow and Ascher, 2006). These books use a multi-strand syllabus around topic-based units including focuses on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation together with "skills" lessons for listening, reading, speaking, and writing (see Appendix B for an example). The student's book is supplemented by a workbook containing language practice exercises, a teacher's book with notes and photocopiable resources, a CD, and a video course. Altogether, there is ample material for the time available. Regarding methodology, the in-house CELE handbook (2010) states that VFMs are expected to take a

"communicative approach" to course implementation and ensure integration of the four skills.

VFMs are not permitted to replace *Top Notch* with another published course book without undergoing a lengthy approval procedure. However, provided they adhere to the guidelines above, they are free to deviate from the syllabus and even replace it completely if they wish. Furthermore, in the absence of a common assessment, VFMs are also at liberty to design their own. With only four broad "goals and objectives," there is considerable freedom of action.

Syllabuses and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

White (1988) describes two types of syllabus, Type A and Type B. With Type A, or product syllabuses, the content of the course is based on a sequence of discrete items of language presented, inductively or deductively, to learners as parcels of explicit knowledge, which are then practiced. These items are traditionally areas of grammar. However, it is also possible to find syllabuses organized by language functions or by lexis. Today, many commercially produced courses have multi-strand syllabuses containing functional, lexical, and phonological threads, usually around a grammatical core. With Type A syllabuses, there is a distinction between the content of the course, or *what* is to be learned, and the methodology of its delivery, or *how* it is to be learned. A Type A syllabus could, for example, be delivered using a grammar-translation method, an audiolingual method, a communicative method, or a combination of methods.

Type B syllabuses, or procedural syllabuses, on the other hand, focus on the process of learning itself, or the *how* of learning. Reflecting ideas of experiential learning, they involve learner engagement in the successful

completion of classroom tasks involving meaningful, contextualized, and often interactive language use. In a task-based syllabus, for example, objectives may be defined according to what the learners are expected to be able to do in a social context, such as asking a passer-by for directions in the street, or reading and responding to a business email requesting information. Through active participation in meaningful, contextualized, and holistic communicative acts, productive and receptive, it is assumed that language learning processes will occur in a naturalistic way.

Type B syllabuses reflect both socio-cognitive and socio-cultural theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). For the former, they provide opportunities for comprehensible input, including interactionally modified input, output (including pushed output), and noticing (Schmidt, 1990). For the latter, there are opportunities for learning mediated by interaction with instructors, peers, and tools in the social environment, at a level that reflects their current stage of development, or Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Participation is essential as "development is not so much a matter of the taking in and the possession of knowledge but rather the taking part in social activity" (Ellis, 2003, p. 176). As the emphasis is on learning through the experience of language use rather than explicit teaching of an inventory of language points, the traditional divide between syllabus and methodology is less distinct (Nunan, 2004, p. 6).

As mentioned, the CELE handbook states that VFMs should employ a communicative approach in the delivery of the FE course. With its roots in SLA research, CLT is an approach to language teaching which prioritizes learners' use of the language as a tool for meaningful communication. Howatt (1984) describes both weak and strong forms. In the former, discrete

items of language, such as grammatical forms, are introduced and practiced, often following a Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) procedure. The learners are presented with an item and provided the opportunity to practice it, firstly in a controlled way, and subsequently in a freer situation. PPP is popular for the delivery of Type A syllabuses. It is easy to follow, easily accountable and common on teacher training courses.

Weak-CLT and Type A syllabuses have been criticised on a number of counts. They do not reflect the connectionist view that language use and learning are largely implicit, rather than explicit, processes, or that language development occurs in a non-linear, holistic, organic, and unstable fashion, according to the learner's own internal syllabus, rather than an external, atomised, linear syllabus (Long and Crookes, 1992, p. 26). Furthermore, learners often do not learn what is taught. Critics of Type A syllabuses, such as Skehan (1996, p. 18), point, for example, to the low levels of communicative ability of language learners emerging from secondary school in education systems around the world.

Strong CLT, on the other hand, is consistent with SLA findings, prioritizing meaningful use of language in the classroom while relegating explicit focuses on language to a secondary role, or even omitting them completely. "Learners do not first acquire language as a structural system and then learn how to use this system in communication but actually discover the system itself in the process of learning how to communicate" (Ellis, 2003, p.28). Classroom pedagogy is organized around the *task*, defined here as "an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (Bygate, Skehan, and Swain, 2001, p. 11), or non-linguistic outcome. While the learners are actively

engaged in and reflect upon meaningful language use, the teacher's role is to provide scaffolding, encouragement, and feedback. With its focus on processes rather than the product, therefore, strong CLT is compatible with Type B syllabuses.

Some proponents of strong CLT advocate the complete absence of any language focus (Krashen, 1981; Prabhu, 1987), favouring a pure task-based approach through which learners acquire new language, implicitly and explicitly, exclusively through use. However, there is currently a strong consensus that task-based language teaching is most effective when supported by explicit focuses on language (Long, 1991). This addresses a perceived weakness of strong CLT that it can lead to fossilization of interlanguage development, and simplified or inaccurate language use. Willis (1996) suggests an integrated approach to course design with language focuses incorporated into the task cycle.

Traditionally, language focuses have largely centered on formal grammar. However, today there is a broader view of what communicative ability comprises. Using descriptive analyses of real-world language in use, research has provided insights into other areas of proficiency, including lexical, pragmatic, phonological, orthographical, strategic, and discourse competences (Bachman, 1990). The importance of exemplar-based language and the role of fixed or semi-fixed prefabricated lexical chunks, lexical patterning, and collocation, both in language use and acquisition, is also now widely acknowledged (Nattinger and de Carrico, 1992). Ellis (2003) considers language use and learning primarily lexical in nature, particularly at lower levels, and argues that through "abstracting regularities from chunks" (p. 104) learners only subsequently make the connections and develop the

ability to manipulate morphology and syntax. Also important is the view of language as discourse, used as part of a larger coherent whole reflecting the context of situation and encompassing such features as cohesion, turn-taking, face, and rhetoric.

Focus

In light of the above, I felt that there were three broad issues with the FE program at AU.

Firstly, the current syllabus is largely a Type A and, therefore, not truly communicative or consistent with SLA research. As stated, the *Top Notch* course in use is based on a multi-strand syllabus with both Type A and Type B elements. It has a strong product focus, with a traditional emphasis on grammar, but also contains functional, lexical, and phonological strands. The treatment of these areas suggests a weak-CLT PPP methodology. While there are also communicative tasks, the syllabus's emphasis remains Type A with its sequential teaching of discrete items of language. It reflects a view that a language can be taught piecemeal rather than encouraged to emerge organically through the "foregrounding of students' meanings and intentions" (Thornbury, 2009, p. 20).

By the time they enter the university, the overwhelming majority of Japanese students in the program have undergone six years of English study at school, following a Type A syllabus in which fragments of decontextualized and often meaningless language are presented and practiced in a tightly controlled manner. The language of instruction was, with few exceptions, Japanese, and the methodology used largely based on grammar-translation with audiolingual elements and perhaps some weak-CLT. The pursuit of such a program, preparation for discrete item tests such

as the TOEIC, and the lack of opportunities for Japanese children to use English likely explain the low levels of communicative performance among school leavers. It is also probably true that this educational background, with its emphasis on knowledge without application, has influenced the learners' attitude towards language learning itself. To compensate, I felt that a strongly communicative Type B syllabus was required for the FE course. This would encourage the experience of real language use, risk-taking behavior, implicit learning, and the development of procedural knowledge and skill development.

However, with its strong grammatical focus, the *Top Notch* syllabus does little to redress the shortcomings of the learners' previous experiences. Instead, it may reinforce them. Furthermore, I felt that the relatively few receptive and productive tasks the book does contain lacked contextualization, task input, variety, and complexity. On another point, throughout the book, there are a large number of 'conversations,' or dialogues the learners are required to memorize and practice. Such audiolingual-style exercises are also difficult to justify theoretically in the twenty-first century.

The *Top Notch* syllabus can be adapted, supplemented, and reinterpreted, as it currently is, by skilled teachers in a strong-CLT way so that it reflects more closely SLA findings and meets student needs. Both Ellis (2003) and Willis and Willis (2007) suggest ways of doing this for teachers in positions where they are unable to change their course book. However, as VFMs at AU do have the discretion not to use *Top Notch*, it may well be more effective to develop a Type B syllabus from scratch rather than attempt to reconcile two contrasting approaches.

The second issue with the current FE program is that much of the language presented in the course book does not reflect modern descriptions of language as it is used in the real world. Despite claims of corpus support, the Type A product syllabus is heavily weighted in favor of traditional atomistic focuses on prescriptive, formal grammar, usually centered on the verb phrase. While there are also functional and phonological strands, these also tend to be fragmented and under-contextualized. The phonological focuses, for example, are usually on segmental, i.e., individual, phonemes rather than supra-segmental features such as features of connected speech. Exemplar-based language in the form of strings of prefabricated language and discourse-specific features is under-represented. There is little in the way of naturally-occurring lexical chunks or authentic holistic discourse.

Finally, the course book syllabus does not adequately meet the needs of the learners in FE English in terms of target tasks. Many of the spoken tasks in the *Top Notch* series are role-plays of institutional talk in the United States, typically service encounters in shops, restaurants, banks, and other social settings. While this may be useful for someone in (or about to go to) an English-speaking country, most students in the FE program have little need for it. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the topic areas within the context of which these tasks are introduced are relevant or interesting for the students. This is a common issue with “off the shelf” courses produced for the mass market, which are unlikely to address the needs of specific learners in specific contexts.

Response

Given these perceived inadequacies of the current provision, I took preliminary steps to create a framework for the development of a topically

organized task-based syllabus. The following seven factors for consideration were taken from Graves (1996, p. 13). An extract from the syllabus can be found in Appendix C.

a) Needs assessment

As indicated, I estimated that the learners in two first-year classes, B10 and L7, were at approximately A1/A2 on the CEF. As there were no specific needs at the beginning of the 2010/2011 academic year, the learners completed a simple survey to elicit their preferred topics. From a shortlist, they chose the following in order of preference: sport, the media, people, health, the night, climate and weather, the natural world, and society and family. They also ranked the four skills required by the university in their order of preference, which was speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

b) Goals and objectives

I retained the four general "goals and objectives" set out by the university. For practical reasons of time and convenience, I only developed specific objectives after the selection of topics and tasks. I selected proficiency objectives reflecting the ethos of the communicative Type B syllabus and wrote them in the form of 'can do' statements (see Appendix C). Given the contrast in approach between this course and the learners' assumed previous classroom experience, I also paid attention to affective goals with a view to encouraging behaviors such as risk-taking, willingness to make mistakes, and reflection, all important for success in an experiential, procedural approach to learning.

c) Conceptualizing content

Following Willis (1996), I chose a topically-organized task-based approach with an integrated focus on form. However, beyond a general

description of the task and target discourse, I did not specify discrete language focuses. These were to be decided on locally, allowing me the flexibility to choose according to the learners' requirements. This integrated approach to form brought the advantages of complete contextualization of the language and immediate opportunity for its application. This integration is outlined in section d) below.

d) Organization of content and activities

Over the thirty-week course, the class covered a total of seven topics, with approximately four weeks, or twelve class hours, per topic. The tasks selected were both receptive and productive, involving spoken and written contexts to be completed either in pairs, small groups, or individually. I intuitively judged all tasks to lie within the learners' ZPD. In other words, it was possible, with scaffolding from me, peers, and materials, for the learners to be able to perform them independently, if not proficiently. In order to help maintain learner motivation, I considered a wide variety of tasks important. Receptive tasks usually preceded productive ones and, following the needs assessment, I prioritized spoken discourse over written discourse. Cognitively simple tasks, such as information exchange tasks, were usually followed by more complex ones, such as decision-making tasks.

Receptive tasks were typically preceded by the introduction of topical schemata and lexis in the pre-task stage. These included teacher-led elicitations of vocabulary, brainstorming, quizzes, and short discussions in pairs or small groups. In the task input, there was also often help with rhetorical organization. Before listening tasks, there was usually a phonological focus on stress and linking to help the learners comprehend strings of language that may be comprehensible when written but not when

spoken. I used a wide variety of audio and video recordings, including interviews, news reports, lectures, seminars, meetings and discussions, and the learners also listened 'live' to me. Texts for reading included short academic texts, news reports, emails, and magazine articles. The tasks to exploit the reading and listening texts usually focused initially on top-down processes followed by more localized tasks aimed at points of detail. The post-task stage tended to consist of pair discussions to elicit personalized and authentic responses from the learners followed by optional language focuses, often on interpersonal or textual aspects of the discourse, including work on syntax and morphology. With listening tasks, I used transcripts of the recordings for this post-task language work.

Productive tasks were also preceded by a variety of pre-task work. Again, I paid considerable attention to contextualization using spoken and written contextual input, brainstorming, and rhetorical organization, topical schemata, and lexis. Spoken tasks included discussions, role-plays, narratives, simulations, decision-making tasks, problem-solving tasks, surveys, and information-gap tasks. All were performed in pairs or small groups for the obvious benefits of increased participation and use of language, as well as to promote confidence and reduce loss of face. More cognitively complex tasks were preceded by the opportunity for strategic planning of what the learners intended to say in order to encourage fluency. These tasks were often preceded by teacher-led demonstration. At other times, they were performed by the learners first, followed by a teacher-led demonstration, and subsequently repeated by learners. This task repetition was of great importance. Firstly, it allowed opportunity for the instant application of corrective feedback to encourage interlanguage restructuring

and accuracy. This feedback encompassed the broad spectrum of communicative competence, including morphological, syntactic, phonological, lexical, and discourse elements. Often, these were practiced using exercises I created or adapted. Secondly, task repetition allowed learner exposure, when time allowed, to model texts of expert users' performances of identical tasks, and I made both written texts and transcribed recordings of oral tasks available to the learners. These models had the aim of providing learners the opportunity to notice the gap between their own performance and those of expert users (Swain, 1985), and thereby allow opportunities for interlanguage extension and restructuring, promoting both complexity and accuracy. To discourage demotivation, tasks were also sometimes repeated with a slight variation, such as a change of partners, a reversal of roles, or a change of input material. The stages for written tasks followed a similar cycle. Following the pre-task stage, there was the completion of an initial draft, exposure to a model text, or texts, with language focus activities, a second draft, corrective feedback from me, and a final draft.

As mentioned, language focuses were integrated into the task cycles. The importance of exemplar-based language was reflected in the explicit teaching of lexical items in pre-task phase and in learner exposure to spoken transcripts and written texts. There was also a remedial focus based on corrective feedback and aimed at accuracy. The third method was the use of discourse analysis to identify salient features of both the recording transcripts and reading texts, as well as the model recording transcripts and writing models for the productive tasks. I did this with the aim of encouraging interlanguage extension. The post-task focus on language

ensured that all language highlighted was fully contextualized and had been processed for meaning.

e) Selecting and developing materials and activities

I derived the materials from a variety of sources. Many, which I had created in previous teaching contexts, were available on my hard-drive and adapted. I obtained or adapted others from a variety of published course books and published resources, in particular the course book *Language Leader Pre-Intermediate* (Lebeau et al., 2008). Others still I created around texts and recordings from online and offline resources or made myself from scratch. Generally, I considered it important to use authentic materials for their real-world face value and to avoid exposing learners to stilted and unnatural discourse. I also made use of video clips streamed or downloaded to a tablet computer connected to the television screen. To encourage review and recycling, learners were required to keep a file for their printed handouts. Some examples of the materials can be found in Appendix D.

f) Evaluation

I based assessment of the learners primarily on criteria that reflected the socio-cultural view that language learning is dependent on engagement in socially mediated language use. Prominent among these were participation, effort and active engagement in communicative tasks, including attendance and punctuality, and the uptake of feedback. Further assessment of performance was in the evaluation of written tasks which rewarded time and care taken for completion, and attention to both language focused on in class and corrective feedback. As the productive tasks were frequent and, given the learners' limited communicative ability, relatively short, assessment of their performance was simple and practical, without

going into undue specificity (Appendix E). In addition, I also assessed learners for their maintenance of their file containing their handouts, important especially in the absence of a course book. Finally, to satisfy a perceived need for a quantitative measure and to encourage positive washback with regard to vocabulary learning, I also gave the class a vocabulary test at the end of each of the two semesters. The lexis contained in these tests was derived from the contexts and tasks covered in class. It had therefore been encountered in a meaningful and contextualized way and did not form a decontextualized list.

I outline a tentative evaluation of the course itself in the next section. It relied on my observation of the learners' participation, effort, and performance, as well as the completion of an end of course learner survey.

g) Consideration of resources and constraints

As stated, there were few institutional restraints on the design of this syllabus. I addressed motivation, necessary for participation, by allowing choice of topic and mode (speaking, listening, reading, or writing), selecting only tasks within learners' ZPD, providing extensive scaffolding, and providing variety. Further restraints, including class size, available resources and technology, punctuality, and learner maturity, were identical to those for *Top Notch*-based classes.

Course Implementation

I introduced the course to first-year classes B10 and L7 in semester one from April to July, 2011. From the outset, it was evident that many of the learners were unfamiliar with the approach taken including the idea of experiential learning and the use of pair and small group work. I had to repeatedly communicate the idea that participation in meaningful language

use, rather than explicit language study, was needed, and that a high grade would require sustained effort, participation, and attention, rather than the learning of pieces of declarative knowledge for display in an end-of-semester examination. It was also the case that the short 45-minute periods were a disadvantage as the task sequences invariably required considerably more time than this. As a result, the beginning of each class was often spent repeating or recalling stages from the previous lesson.

Spoken tasks often needed more contextual support than anticipated to ensure the learners had sufficient schematic knowledge to perform them. They also required repeated demonstration and modeling, even when they had become familiar to the learners. It was necessary too to frequently remind learners that risk-taking was desirable and mistakes acceptable in order to improve performance, and that the priority was the successful completion of the task. I spent considerably more time than anticipated, modeling interaction with the help of more able learners. This was to demonstrate that successful outcomes and extended discourse were possible without the need to resort to Japanese or have long pauses, and that breakdowns in communication could be overcome by using strategies for repair.

In addition, I also frequently needed to redesign spoken tasks in order to make them more achievable. Open tasks in particular, including opinion gap tasks, generated less language than closed tasks with clearly defined outcomes, such as information gap tasks. To remedy this, I redesigned opinion gap tasks in the format of the Likert scale to restrict choice and encourage an outcome (see Appendix D). I also redesigned materials to require learners to record their partners' responses on paper. Furthermore, it

was also apparent that the provision of time for pre-task strategic planning, allowing learners time to prepare what they wanted to say or write, was useful to encourage fluency, and I provided increasing opportunity for this as the course progressed. Writing tasks, on the whole, were easier to implement and the learners appeared comfortable with the writing process from an early stage.

Despite being easier for me to control, receptive tasks, listening and reading, also required careful design and scaffolding in order to encourage top-down processes and focus on meaning, emphases which appeared unfamiliar to many learners. I paid considerable attention to the provision of socio-cultural and topic schemata, which was often lacking. Tasks requiring attention to smaller details followed and more time than anticipated was needed to check comprehension.

However, despite the above challenges, it was clearly evident that, with scaffolding, demonstration, and the use of pair work, the learners generally responded very well to the approach and levels of participation in tasks were high. The overwhelming majority of written and spoken tasks were performed to the expected standards and, in most cases, time was taken to complete them. On many occasions, the learners talked at length in English during both closed and open tasks, and it was me who had to indicate the end of the task. The extensive scaffolding of receptive tasks ensured that they were achievable, and the learners were generally successful in completing them. Furthermore, at no time was a learner ever observed sleeping, apparently not an uncommon occurrence at a university in Japan. Overall, there was a positive, collaborative, active and warm

atmosphere in the class at almost all times, and all learners who met the attendance criteria successfully passed the course.

The feedback in the end-of-course survey was overwhelmingly positive (Appendix F). The learners indicated that they had enjoyed the course, that they felt that they had participated, and that their English had improved as a result, particularly with regard to listening and pronunciation. They also strongly supported the decision not to use a course book.

Discussion

At the outset of the development of the course, I had no intention of conducting a systematic research project. The indications outlined above are limited to my own observations of the learners on task and their completion of the end-of-course survey. I made no attempt to measure the learners' communicative ability at the beginning or end of the course, nor is there any evidence that this course was more effective than one based on *Top Notch*. A more systematic effort to collect data would, of course, have provided more reliable indications. I could have made, transcribed and analyzed recordings of learners performing spoken tasks. I could have also collected and analyzed samples of written work and conducted focused interviews with small groups of learners. This triangulation could be used in the future.

Nevertheless, the above indications, however limited, are encouraging. Levels of learner effort and participation, in both using the language and in focusing on it explicitly, were high. The learners found the course enjoyable and useful, and largely felt that their ability to communicate in English had improved. Overall, it was a positive experience for them and a welcome change from their previous language learning experience. If it is accepted that effort, participation, and attention are essential for language learning,

the approach taken deserves further exploration. Moreover, the course based on the use of tasks has a solid theoretical foundation. It draws directly on current SLA theory that language learning occurs through meaningful use, and that it can be supported by integrated explicit focuses on language.

This integration of form, which allows the teacher to 'continually change the focus between the 'parts' and the 'whole' (Nunn, 2006, p. 75), can offer some reassurance to those who may not be convinced of the advantages of a strongly communicative task-based approach. The task-based course outlined here is not exclusively composed of tasks. It is supported by well researched and well targeted focuses on language. Those who worry that a strong-communicative course means simply free talking can be assured that this is not the case. Furthermore, the range of language focused on and the amount of time spent on it can be increased or reduced according to circumstances, and teachers preferring to devote more attention to form have a framework within which they can do so. Nunn (2006) suggests the creation of an exercise bank developed from language areas relevant to the tasks and the learners' performance of them. Tasks themselves can also be adapted to the learners through modification of task input, conditions, and outcomes. By tailoring these variables to specific learners, teachers are able to increase or reduce the level of challenge, provide effective scaffolding, and create a learning environment with positive expectations of success.

Type B syllabuses delivered using a strong-CLT pedagogy can appear daunting to those familiar with Type A syllabuses delivered using a weak-CLT or a grammar-translation approach. They can present challenges for learners, teachers, teacher-trainers, assessors, institutions, and parents who

may be unfamiliar with the rationale and/or reluctant to change established practices. For many, it is a true ‘paradigm shift’ (Woodward, 1996, p. 4). However, as this course indicates, it is certainly possible to develop a Type B syllabus, while at the same time, addressing concerns about specifications of content, learner and teacher roles, and accountability.

The framework can be developed to meet the specific needs of different groups of learners in other contexts, such as those on AU’s business and business hospitality English courses, thereby avoiding reliance on commercially published courses. With its avoidance of specified language items, the framework is also highly flexible and lends itself to adaptation and incremental development. Materials derived from authentic sources and ideas from commercially published courses can be added over time. In this way, much of what is useful in published course books can be selected and/or adapted for the benefit of specific groups of learners without the requirement to follow the book as a whole. Topic areas reflecting the learners’ major subjects, such as business, law, or economics, and tasks reflecting target discourses in those fields, such as business negotiations, jury deliberations, or meetings to decide a budget, can be developed. Such a customized, tailored approach may increase the face validity of the courses in the eyes of stakeholders as well as those of the learners with a subsequent increase in motivation. For those groups, particularly at lower levels, which find productive tasks challenging, emphasis could be placed on the performance of receptive tasks, ensuring that the learners are exposed to large amounts of meaningful and contextualized language before being required to produce language.

A further advantage is that, with its flexibility and lack of specificity, the framework offers teachers a balance of structure and creativity. The topics and the use of tasks form the structure. However, within this, teachers also have the opportunity of bringing their own ideas to the classroom, including new tasks, new language focuses, and new materials. This may foster a shared sense of commitment among groups of teachers, with perhaps a range of backgrounds, encourage greater consistency, continuity of approach, and the sharing of ideas and good practice. On a practical level, the framework can help avoid another drawback of using a course book, namely that when it is replaced, teachers are compelled to adapt to the new material and often find themselves unable to use tried and tested material developed to support the previous course book. However, with a framework like the one above, organized by topic, easy to follow, flexible, and adaptable, change is incremental rather than revolutionary. Given the high turnover rate of VFMs at AU, such a system would provide some continuity. It would also offer support to new teachers as well as providing existing ones a platform for the implementation of changes resulting from reflection and feedback. These longer-term benefits would compensate for the admittedly sometimes time-consuming materials creation at the outset.

Course and syllabus design is a never-ending process of planning, delivering, reflecting, modifying and repeating. The course described here is only at an early stage of its evolutionary development. With time, feedback, and further research, the topical areas, the tasks themselves, and the language focuses can be expanded, supplemented, replaced, or adapted. I hope that the framework for the development of task-based courses described above may serve as a useful starting point for course and syllabus

design at AU. It reflects current research into SLA and communicative pedagogy centered on language use rather than explicit language study, viewing language as "a tool for doing rather than…an object for studying" (Ellis, 2003, p. 166). It also reflects modern descriptions of real language in use. It is flexible to implement and develop, motivating for students, supportive to teachers, and accountable to stakeholders.

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Appendix A: Common Reference Levels: Global Scale

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can

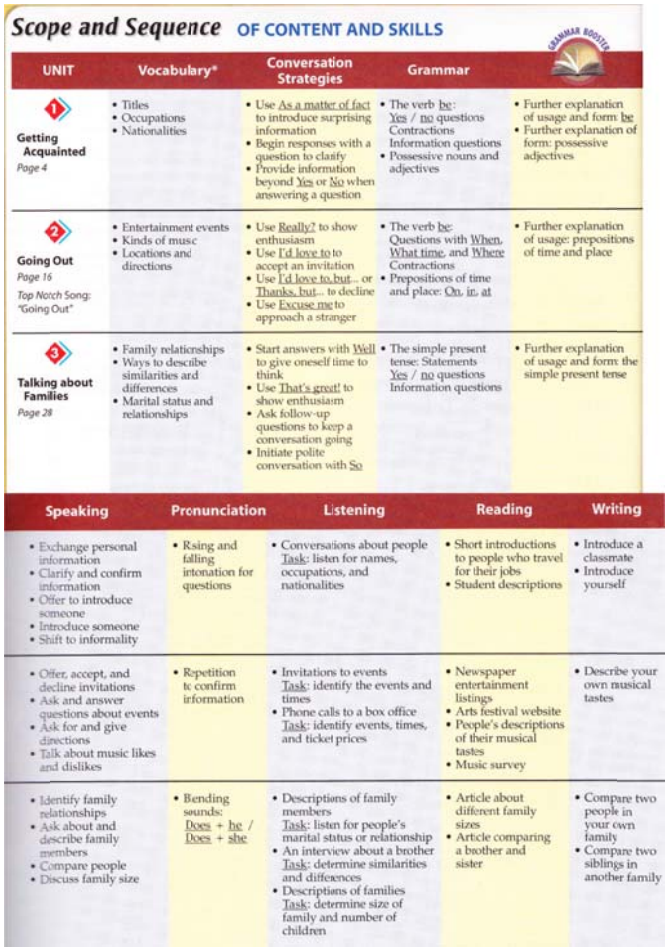
		use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions

		about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Learning, Teaching, Assessment

(Council of Europe 2001. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press: 24)

Appendix B: Top Notch 1 Syllabus



Scope and Sequence OF CONTENT AND SKILLS

UNIT	Vocabulary*	Conversation Strategies	Grammar	
1 Getting Acquainted *Page 4*	• Titles • Occupations • Nationalities	• Use As a matter of fact to introduce surprising information • Begin responses with a question to clarify • Provide information beyond Yes or No when answering a question	• The verb be: Yes / no questions Contractions Information questions • Possessive nouns and adjectives	• Further explanation of usage and form: be • Further explanation of form: possessive adjectives
2 Going Out *Page 16* *Top Notch Song: "Going Out"*	• Entertainment events • Kinds of music • Locations and directions	• Use Really? to show enthusiasm • Use I'd love to to accept an invitation • Use I'd love to, but... or Thanks, but... to decline • Use Excuse me to approach a stranger	• The verb be: Questions with When, What time, and Where Contractions • Prepositions of time and place: On, in, at	• Further explanation of usage: prepositions of time and place
3 Talking about Families *Page 28*	• Family relationships • Ways to describe similarities and differences • Marital status and relationships	• Start answers with Well to give oneself time to think • Use That's great! to show enthusiasm • Ask follow-up questions to keep a conversation going • Initiate polite conversation with So	• The simple present tense: Statements Yes / no questions Information questions	• Further explanation of usage and form: the simple present tense

Speaking	Pronunciation	Listening	Reading	Writing
• Exchange personal information • Clarify and confirm information • Offer to introduce someone • Introduce someone • Shift to informality	• Rising and falling intonation for questions	• Conversations about people Task: listen for names, occupations, and nationalities	• Short introductions to people who travel for their jobs • Student descriptions	• Introduce a classmate • Introduce yourself
• Offer, accept, and decline invitations • Ask and answer questions about events • Ask for and give directions • Talk about music likes and dislikes	• Repetition to confirm information	• Invitations to events Task: identify the events and times • Phone calls to a box office Task: identify events, times, and ticket prices	• Newspaper entertainment listings • Arts festival website • People's descriptions of their musical tastes • Music survey	• Describe your own musical tastes
• Identify family relationships • Ask about and describe family members • Compare people • Discuss family size	• Bending sounds: Does + he / Does + she	• Descriptions of family members Task: listen for people's marital status or relationship • An interview about a brother Task: determine similarities and differences • Descriptions of families Task: determine size of family and number of children	• Article about different family sizes • Article comparing a brother and sister	• Compare two people in your own family • Compare two siblings in another family

Saslow, J. and Ascher, A. Top Notch: English for Today's World 1

(2006. New York: Pearson)

Appendix C: Syllabus Extract

- Students can ask for, give and justify opinions on issues related to the media.
- Students can read and comprehend a short text about a person who works in the media.
- Students can listen to and comprehend an interview with a person who works in the media on his media habits and preferences.
- Students can describe and account for their own media habits and preferences at length.
- Students can read, comprehend and respond personally to a short text on the international news media and internet media.
- Students can ask for, give and justify opinions and preferences on the international news media.
- Students can define key vocabulary relating to the media.
- Students can, using a range of strategies, deal with communication breakdown without resorting to Japanese.
- Students can describe and discuss television programmes at length, giving and justifying their opinions and preferences.
- Students can listen to and comprehend a decision-making meeting to design a television variety programme and make notes on suggestions and decisions made.
- Students can participate in a decision-making meeting to design a television variety programme, including asking for and making suggestions, negotiating, agreeing and disagreeing, and reaching a decision.
- Students can write a short report describing the television programme they have decided upon.

Topic	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Reading
Media	• Survey on media habits • Pair interview on news consumption • Discussion on attitudes towards the news • Information gap crossword • Interview on attitudes to talk shows • Role play brainstorming meeting to design a TV talk show. • Role play decision making meeting for a TV talk show	• Interview with website designer on media habits • Listening to brainstorming meeting for a TV talk show • Listening to decision making meeting to design a TV talk show.	• Report on decisions at meeting	• Text on an TESL website designer • Text on international and internet news sources • Model reports describing ideas for TV talk show

Appendix D: Example materials

Speaking

Do you like TV programmes in which people discuss…	Yes, very much	Yes, I quite like them	I don't really care	No, I don't like them much	I really don't like them	Reasons
…politics?						
…pop music?						
…films?						
…business?						
…cars?						
…comedy?						
…fashion?						
…celebrities and fame?						
…design?						
…nature and the environment?						

Listening

Name of the programme: *Fame and* _____ (1)

has the latest _____ (2) and opinions about _____ (3), _____ (4) and entertainment.

Today's show:

interview with deputy _____ (5) about sports and _____ (6)

meeting with young movie directors in _____ (7)

_____ (8) from *The Hoodies*

visit to _____ (9) offices in the USA

_____ (10) about famous people

Jeff, Kylie, Bill

Fame and Fortune

Target audience: _____ (1)

Time schedule: _____ (2)

Kylie thinks there should be _____ (3) in the show.

Jeff is surprised at this idea? (Y/N?) (4)

Kylie suggests interviewing politicians about their _____ (5), _____ (6) and life before politics.

Bill and Jeff agree with Kylie. (Y/N?) (7)

Bill suggests _____ (8) on the show.

He suggests they should play _____ (9) songs instead of one.

Jeff agrees with Bill. (Y/N?) (10)

Kylie suggests interviews with _____ (11) people.

Jeff agrees with Kylie. (Y/N?) (12) Reason: they tend to be very _____ (13).

Jeff suggests features about _____ (14) e.g. Google, _____ (15), Apple

Kylie agrees with Jeff. (Y/N?) (16)

Length of show: _____ (17)

Bill suggests features about _____. (18)

Kylie and Jeff are surprised at this idea? (Y/N?) (19)

Kylie and Jeff think this is a good idea? (Y/N?) (20)

Planning

	Example	My ideas	My group's decision
Target audience	*young adults*		
Day and time	*Friday, early evening*		
Topics	*politics*		

	music *business*		
How to make it more interesting	*interview politicians about personal lives* *have bands perform 3 or 4 songs* *have features about businesses with exciting products and ideas*		
Number of presenters	*3?*		
Name of programme	*Fame and Fortune*		

Asking for suggestions

1) Any _____? Kylie?

2) Anything _____? Bill?

3) What _____ shall we put in the programme?

Making suggestions

4) I _____ __ _____ include some politics in the programme.

5) ___ _____ __ get some politicians on the programme?

6) _____ ask them about their lives.

7) _____ _____ music?

8) __ _____ have a live band on the programme.

9) _____ _____ interview___ rich people?

10) I _____ __ _____ do something about high profile business.

11) _____ _____ something with animals?

12) I thought that __ _____ have pets that have unusual talents.

13) __ _____ have a competition.

Agreeing

14) I ____ it.

15) Nice ____.

16) Great _____.

Disagreeing *17) Really?* *18) I _____ _____ that's a good idea.*

Target audience: _____	Day and time: _____	Length: _____	Name of programme: _____
Number of presenters: _____			

Topics: 1) _____ 2) _____ 3) _____	How to make it more interesting: _____ _____ _____

Writing

Fame and Fortune (1) This is an _____ variety show for a _____ audience. It is scheduled for the _____slot and has _____ presenters.	**Fame and Fortune (2)** Fame and Fortune is a _____ show aimed at _____. It is an _____ long and it is scheduled for broadcast early on _____.

The programme will include _____, music and _____. Specifically, there will be _____ with politicians about their _____, _____ and lives before politics. There will also be a _____ every week, which will perform _____ songs. Finally, there will be features about high-profile _____ with exciting new ideas and products, such as _____, Sony and _____.	There are _____ presenters. The show will feature _____, music and _____. It will include _____ with politicians about their _____, _____ and lives before politics. It will also have a different _____ each week, playing _____ numbers. Lastly, the programme will feature high-profile _____ like _____, Sony and _____, that have exciting new ideas and products.

businesses (x2)	*interviews (x2)*	*politics (x2)*	*Apple (x2)*	*early Friday evening*
hour-long	*three (x2)*	*young adult*	*interests (x2)*	
families (x2)	*business (x2)*	*hour*	*Google (x2)*	*three or four (x2)*
variety	*live band (x2)*	*young adults*	*Friday evening*	

for ……..	young adults a young adult audience	……..	broadcast early on Friday evening the early Friday evening slot
(it) has	three presenters	The programme	……

…….		The show It	will include… will have…
……. like	Google, Sony and Apple	It will have There will be	……. interviews with…
Finally, …….,		a live band	, ……. playing…

there are	*such as*	*it is scheduled for*	*which will perform…*
aimed at	*will feature…*	*Lastly,*	*features about…*

Appendix E: Assessment scale

E – Excellent	*The performance is excellent. It shows high levels of participation and effort. It also demonstrates the uptake of feedback. If it is written work, it has been done fully and carefully, and is well-presented. It is original. It is handed in on time.*
G – Good	*The performance is good. It demonstrates acceptable levels of participation and effort, and the uptake of feedback. If it is written work, it has been done reasonably fully and carefully and is reasonably well-presented. It is original. It may or may not be handed in on time.*
W – Weak	*The performance is weak. Effort, participation and performance*

	are low. If it is written, it has not been done fully or carefully, or is well-presented. It may not be original. It may not have been handed in on time.
A - Absent	*The student was absent.*

Appendix F: Learner Feedback (extract)

Freshman English – End of Course Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is to help the teacher improve the Freshman English course for next year's students.

Please answer the questions honestly. You do not need to write your name.

1. How interesting did you find the topics that we covered on the course? *(circle one for each)*

a)	The weather -	Very interesting 8	Interesting 28	Don't know 6	Boring 0	Very boring 1
b)	Work -	Very interesting 10	Interesting 30	Don't know 2	Boring 0	Very boring 1
c)	Sport -	Very interesting 25	Interesting 13	Don't know 3	Boring 1	Very boring 1
d)	The media -	Very interesting17	Interesting 17	Don't know 5	Boring 2	Very boring 2

2. Overall, how interesting did you find the topics? *(circle one)*

Very interesting 9	Interesting 18	Don't know 6	Boring 0	Very boring 1

6. Did you want to have a textbook? *(circle one)*

Yes 6	No 28	Don't know 9

7. Why? / Why not?

Because we get many papers / Good now / I don't know / Don't know / I don't know / Very interesting / It's not enough paper / I can take and read it anywhere / If I don't know I can read the textbook and help a lot / Hand out is Useful / raise communication time If we have textbook difficult / It's too heavy / Nothing textbook but very understand / Everyday study / textbook is heavy / enough only handout / very heavy / Because now lesson is happy for me / Because textbook is not need / This class is very good / This class is very fun / Paper is very interesting / Handouts are very nice / Textbook is expensive / I don't know / Please keep this class style / This class is very good and very interesting / I don't know / We need to speak and talk English / Print is very boring and it is very easy for me to use for textbook / Textbook is expensive / I don't feel neccesalities / I don't know

8. Do you feel your English has improved? *(circle one for each)*

a)	Speaking -	Yes, a lot 14	Yes, a little 21	No 4	Don't know 3
b)	Listening -	Yes, a lot 23	Yes, a little 14	No 4	Don't know 1
c)	Reading -	Yes, a lot 15	Yes, a little 21	No 4	Don't know 3
d)	Writing -	Yes, a lot 8	Yes, a little 26	No 6	Don't know 2
e)	Vocabulary -	Yes, a lot 12	Yes, a little 21	No 8	Don't know 2
f)	Grammar -	Yes, a lot 9	Yes, a little 18	No 12	Don't know 3
g)	Pronunciation -	Yes, a lot 14	Yes, a little 18	No 3	Don't know 6
h)	Spelling -	Yes, a lot 9	Yes, a little 23	No 6	Don't know 4
i)	**Overall -**	**Yes, a lot 20**	**Yes, a little 19**	**No 3**	**Don't know 4**

9. The course overall. *(circle one for each)*

a)	I enjoyed the course.	Strongly agree 23	Agree 17	Don't know 1	Disagree 1	Strongly disagree 1
b)	I participated in class activities.	Strongly agree 11	Agree 22	Don't know 8	Disagree 2	Strongly disagree 0
c)	The course was useful for my future.	Strongly agree 13	Agree 20	Don't know 8	Disagree 0	Strongly disagree 2
d)	My English has improved.	Strongly agree 9	Agree 24	Don't know 8	Disagree 1	Strongly disagree 1

11. How can the teacher make the course better for next year's students?

I think the teacher can let students choose interesting topic and talk about it together / You are very good / I like this class / I like this class / Thank you Dougie!!!! / Thank you very much for years / I like Douggie's class / I was somtime late, sorry / I think good class now / Douggie is good / I think Douggie is good teacher / No change. same this year OK / Of course, teacher's lesson is very interesting / Don't worry. You are very nice teacher / Douggie is very good teacher / I don't know / Thank you Douggie / Find an interesting topic and let the students read it. Practise listening a lot and speaking to improve the students' level / As it is. Thank you for teach English / It's OK / As it is / Because Monday is hard / Communication is important / more working in small group / Of course / The teacher listen to student's saying / Please keep / Please keep class / Don't know

12. What is your major? *(circle one)* business 25
law 18

Thank you.